

The inverse relation between psychopathy and faking good:

Not response bias, but true variance in psychopathic personality

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Abstract

The possibility to assess psychopathy through self-report is debated, amongst others because psychopathic individuals may deliberately underreport psychopathic features (fake good). Meta-analytic research has shown an inverse relation between faking good and self-reported psychopathy, possibly indicating that faking good lowered psychopathy scores (response bias). Low faking good scores, could, however, also reflect true variance in psychopathic personality to the extent that it reflects a disregard of social conventions. Through a secondary analysis (Uzieblo et al., 2010; $n = 675$), we show that controlling for faking good significantly weakens, rather than strengthens, the associations between psychopathy scores and antisocial behavior (alcohol and drug abuse, indirect aggression, delinquency). These findings indicate that the inverse relation between faking good and self-reported psychopathy reflects true variance in psychopathy personality (i.e., low social desirability), not a response bias.

Keywords: psychopathy, antisocial behavior, social desirability, self-report, faking, impression management

Several self-report measures of psychopathy have been developed in recent years, including the Levenson Self Report Psychopathy Scale (LSRP; Levenson et al., 1995), the Psychopathy Personality Inventory - Revised (PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005), the Self Report Psychopathy Scale (SRP; Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, in press), and the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI; Andershed, Kerr, Levander, & Stattin, 2002). The great advantage of these self-report instruments lies in their ease of assessment. At the same time, the possibility to assess psychopathy through self-report is contested. First, several psychopathy features (e.g., shallow affect, lack of empathy, grandiose sense of self-worth) are likely to hinder accurate reflection of one's own behavior (Lilienfeld, 1998, but see Miller & Lynam, 2011). Second, it is questioned to what extent self-report measures of psychopathy are able to assess the affective and interpersonal features of psychopathy (Hare, 1985). Third, self-report measures are vulnerable to distortion by strategic attempt to alter the test outcome (Ziegler, MacCann, & Roberts, 2012), which seems of particular concern in the assessment of psychopathy given that lying and manipulation are core features of psychopathy (Hare, 2003). Among several response styles that may affect the test outcome, probably the greatest concern is faking good, as it may lead to false negatives: Psychopathy remaining off the radar.

Faking good refers to the tendency to give overly positive self-descriptions (Paulhus, 2002). Trying to circumvent faking good, the second generation of self-report psychopathy measures (e.g., LSRP, YPI, PPI-R) avoided the use of items that explicitly assess antisocial behavior (the SRP being the exception). Furthermore, an attempt was made to phrase psychopathic features in a neutral or even positive way. For instance, 'I can remain calm in situations that would make many other people panic' aims to tap into Stress Immunity in the PPI (Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). Likewise, 'by using items that framed the psychopathic features as abilities', the developers of the YPI 'hoped to minimize problems with response distortion and social desirability' (pp134; Andershed et al., 2002). But were these attempts

successful? A recent meta-analysis on 45 studies (Ray et al., 2013) found a small, yet significant, inverse relation between psychopathy and faking good. One way to interpret this finding is that faking good lowered psychopathy scores, hence that self-report psychopathy measures did not succeed in countering response bias. There may be an alternative explanation for the low faking good scores in psychopathic individuals. Faking good measures may reflect true variance in personality rather than response bias (Furnham, 1986; Piedmont, McCrae, Riemann, & Angleitner, 2000). Consider for instance the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) that consists of items such as ‘No matter who I’m talking to, I’m always a good listener’. Psychopathic individuals are known to understand but violate social norms and conventions (Glenn et al., 2009), and may be less inclined to answer affirmatively on such items. The low score on faking good measures may thus tap into the psychopathic personality rather than reflect response bias.

The question whether faking good scales measure response bias or rather real individual differences has a long and rich history in personality, clinical, and occupational psychology (see e.g., Furnham, 1986; McGrath, Mitchell, Kim, & Hough, 2010; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reis, 1996; Piedmont et al., 2000; Ziegler, MacCann, & Roberts, 2012). One way to address the issue has been to investigate whether faking good scales act as a suppressor variable. Ones et al (1996), for instance, investigated whether partialling out faking good scores improved the predictive value of personality scores for job performance. Faking good scores did not act as a suppressor, as the predictive power of personality was not improved by partialling out faking good. Here, we apply this strategy in order to test two opposing explanations for the inverse relation between faking good and self-reported psychopathy (*response bias* versus *true variance in psychopathy*). We examined how controlling for faking good affected the relation between psychopathy and our criterion Variable: Antisocial behavior (i.e., alcohol and drug abuse, indirect aggression, delinquency).

Controlling for faking good should increase the criterion-related validity of self-reported psychopathy when psychopathy scores are distorted by faking good. To the extent that low faking good scores reflect real true aspects of psychopathy, controlling for faking good would actually reduce the relation between psychopathy and the criterion measures. For this purpose, we performed a secondary analysis on the data from Uzieblo et al. (2010). We examined whether controlling for faking good increased – as predicted by the response bias hypothesis – or decreased – as predicted by the true variance in psychopathy hypothesis - the expected positive association between psychopathy and antisocial behavior.

Method

Procedure

Uzieblo et al (2010) had several students distributing a booklet among Belgian community members through the snowball sampling technique, with a 79% response rate. The booklet consisted of a set of questionnaires, of which we selected 3 measures of psychopathy (YPI, LSRP, and PPI-R), 4 measures of antisocial behavior (AUDIT, DAST, BDHI-D, and Self-reported Minor Delinquent Behaviors scale), and 1 measure of faking good (PPI-R-VR), see Material Section. We initially also intended to include the Social Desirability scale and the direct aggression scales of the BDHI-D as a measure of faking good and antisocial behavior, respectively. Because Chronbach's alpha of these scales was very low (i.e., .34 and .15, respectively), we chose not to include these measures into the analyses below.

There was no reward for participation. All participants signed an informed consent and questionnaires were processed anonymously. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Ghent University.

Participants

Seven-hundred and thirteen Belgian community members participated in this study. After exclusion of participants who displayed inconsistent responding (5.33%), data from 675 participants (62.50% male; M age = 32.99 years, SD = 13.92) were used in the analyses. The majority (89.61%) finished high school, and 45.70% had college-level education or higher. The majority of the participants had a Belgian nationality (99.60%). Most of the participants' native language was Dutch (99.00%).

Materials

Psychopathy. The Levenson Self Report Psychopathy Scale (LSRP; Levenson et al., 1995), the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (YPI; Andershed, Kerr, Levander, & Stattin, 2002), and the Psychopathy Personality Inventory - Revised (PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005) are self-report psychopathy scales consisting of 26, 50, and 154 items, respectively. Cronbach's alpha of the LSRP, YPI, and PPI-R total scores were .81, .91, and .91, respectively.

Antisocial behavior. The 10-item Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test (AUDIT; Babor, Higgins-Biddle, Saunders & Monteiro, 2001) assesses identification of hazardous alcohol consumption. The 10-item Drugs Abuse Screening Test (DAST; Skinner, 1982) screens for drug abuse. Nineteen items of the Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory- Dutch version (BDHI-D; Lange, Hoogendoorn, Wiederspalm & de Beurs, 1995) assessed indirect aggression (i.e., suppressed anger, hostility and aggression). Delinquency was assessed through the 7-item ad hoc Self-reported Minor Delinquent Behaviors scale (Verschuere, Uzieblo, & Crombez, 2006). Cronbach's alpha of the indirect aggression, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and delinquency were .78, .85, .60, and .60, respectively.

Faking good. Faking good was assessed by the 13-item Virtuous Responding Scale of the PPI-R (PPI-R-VR). This scale was adapted from the Unlikely Virtues scale of the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ; Tellegen, 1982), and correlates strongly with the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Edens et al., 2001). Cronbach's alpha of the PPI-R-VR was .70.

Results

Faking good showed a negative correlation of moderate size with all three psychopathy measures (LSRP: $r = -.39$, YPI: $r = -.35$, PPI-R: $r = -.37$, all p 's $< .001$).

The first columns of Tables 1, 2, 3 show the total effect of psychopathy on antisocial behavior. To test whether controlling for faking good increased or decreased the association between psychopathy and antisocial behavior, a mediation model was fit to the data. The model included the *direct effect* of self-reported psychopathy on antisocial behavior and the *indirect effect* of self-reported psychopathy on antisocial behavior via faking good. Following MacKinnon, Krull and Lockwood (2000), this indirect effect is equivalent to *the difference* between the *total effect* of self-reported psychopathy on antisocial behavior, and the effect of self-reported psychopathy on antisocial behavior controlled for faking good. Using path analysis of the R-package Lavaan 0.5-14 (Rosseel, 2012), we tested whether the indirect effect differed significantly from zero. Prior to the analysis, all variables were standardized. Bootstrapping (with 1000 bootstrap draws) was used to estimate the corresponding standard errors. Note that the true variance in psychopathy hypothesis predicts the indirect effect to be significantly positive, whereas the response bias hypothesis predicts it to be significantly negative. In 11 of the 12 statistical tests, the indirect effect was significantly positive, thereby supporting the true variance in psychopathy hypothesis. The indirect effect of the PPI-R on alcohol abuse via faking good was positive, yet non-significant.

INSERT TABLE 1, 2, and 3 HERE

Discussion

A frequent critique on self-report measures of psychopathy is that psychopathic individuals are likely to tailor their test results and provide an overly positive image of themselves (Hare, 2003). We observed a *negative* correlation between psychopathy and faking good (cf Ray et al., 2013), that appeared robust across three psychopathy measures. This negative correlation could be an indication of effective response distortion because effectively engaging in faking good lowers one's psychopathy score (Edens et al., 2001). Crucially, we found that correcting for faking good does not strengthen the criterion-related validity of psychopathy, speaking against the idea that faking good scores reflect response bias. Rather, criterion-related validity decreased through correcting for faking good, indicating that controlling for faking good partials out true variance in psychopathy scores. We therefore conclude that low faking good scores reflect a true feature of psychopathy, and may reflect their tendency to disrespect and violate social norms and conventions.

The correlational nature of our study does not allow drawing causal conclusions. A third factor such as neuroticism or conscientiousness may account for both low faking good and high psychopathy scores (Derefinko & Lynam, 2006; Ones, Viswesveran, & Reiss, 1996; Ray et al., 2013). Neuroticism is less likely to explain our findings, as it is unrelated to psychopathy *total* scores (Schmitt & Newman, 1999). Conscientiousness would be a more plausible factor, as it relates to low psychopathy (Derefinko & Lynam, 2006) and high social desirability (Ones, Viswesveran, & Reis, 1996). Note that even if conscientiousness would 'explain' both high psychopathy and low faking good, this would not deteriorate our conclusion that the low faking good scores in psychopathic individuals reflect true variance in the psychopathic personality.

The present study is not without its limitations. First, the present study relies solely upon self-report. Replication with behavioral observations of antisociality seems warranted. Likewise, it would be interesting to see whether behavioral measures of faking good may provide more valid measures of positive impression management. However, whereas for negative impression management such measures (of underperformance) exists and are well validated (e.g., Symptom Validity Tests; see Sweet & Guidotti Breting, 2013), we are unaware of behavioral measures of positive impression management. Second, the use of a community sample restricts generalization of the findings to the forensic context. Apart from generalization purposes, the use of a forensic sample would also allow to test further differential predictions to contrast the response distortion hypothesis with the true variance hypothesis. Specifically, following Ones et al. (1996) and others, it could be tested (1) whether clinician-rated psychopathy (e.g., with the PCL-R) also shows a negative correlation with faking good scores (as predicted by the true variance hypothesis), and (2) how controlling for faking good affects the relation between self-reported psychopathy and clinician-rated psychopathy (the response distortion hypothesis predicting closer correspondence, the true variance hypothesis predicting less correspondence through controlling for faking good).

Our findings have implications with regard to the vulnerability of self-report psychopathy measures to response biases. Our findings echo concerns about the validity of faking good scales as measures of response bias (see also Piedmont et al., 2000; McGrath et al., 2010). Like McGrath et al. (2010), we think it is important to evaluate the validity of bias indicators in the context of the assessment. In the studies included in Ray et al.'s meta-analysis as well as the present study, participants had no external reason to engage in faking good. Participants are merely asked to complete a set of questionnaires, without any incentive to alter their test outcome. Under these conditions, faking good scales seem to tap into

personality rather than act as bias indicators. As such, Ray et al.'s (2013) conclusion that 'the general findings temper concerns of positive response bias and underscore the validity of self-report psychopathy scales (pp.1)' seems to require empirical research in a context where participants are motivated to present in an overly positive way. There are some indications that faking good measures actually have better validity in such a context. In simulation studies, for instance, participants are randomly assigned to the response bias condition (e.g., instructed faking good) or the control condition. Such studies show that people are able to strategically lower the test outcome of self-report psychopathy measures (Edens et al., 2001), yet that faking good scales are able to detect such faking good (Anderson et al., 2013). Although the research base remains limited, it indicates that the validity of faking good measures depends on the context of the assessment. It seems worth exploring whether faking good scales reflect personality in the absence of a motivation to distort test outcome, but response bias when there is an incentive to present oneself overly positive (but see Ones et al., 1996).

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Table 1

Relation between LSRP Total Score and antisocial behavior (controlling for faking good)

	Total effect	Indirect effect	Z
Alcohol use	.18***	.12***	2.40*
Indirect aggression	.41***	.32***	5.18***
Drug use	.21***	.14**	3.30***
Minor delinquency	.29***	.19***	6.01***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .01$

Table 2

Relation between PPI-R total score and antisocial behavior (controlling for faking good)

	Total effect	Indirect effect	Z
Alcohol Use	.28***	.23***	.011
Indirect aggression	.08*	-.06	6.71***
Drug Abuse	.27***	.21***	2.60**
Minor delinquency	.46***	.39***	5.02***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .01$

Table 3

Relation between YPI total score and antisocial behavior (controlling for faking good)

	Total effect	Indirect effect	Z
Alcohol Use	.25***	.20***	2.09*
Indirect aggression	.20***	.09***	5.78***
Drug Abuse	.22***	.16***	3.00***
Minor delinquency	.42***	.35***	5.34***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .01$